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ABSTRACT

The value of light-hearted play in teaching technical recreational sport skills is immense. Children as well as adults can learn more quickly and completely with a games-oriented approach. Often without realizing the hidden goal of excellent skiing or paddling, participants respond to intriguing tasks in a game, immerse themselves in good practice, and expand their means of safely participating in the sport. Ultimately, they become more proficient in the activity. The instructor or leader must understand how to select activities that target specific skill development, safely manage the play environment, and direct play to build enjoyable intensive learning experiences. This paper provides tips and strategies related to selection of a game with a hidden skill agenda, game duration and intensity, total participation, role of the leader, creation of fair teams, cooperation versus competition, selection of appropriate terrain, and simple rules that maintain safety. Examples include five skiing, skating, and paddling games that show how a few simple games can be modified for the ski or water playground. (Author/SV)

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TEACHING TECHNICAL SKILLS THROUGH PLAY

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ABSTRACT

The value of light-hearted play in teaching technical recreational sport skills is immense. Children as well as adults can learn more quickly and completely with a games-oriented approach. The instructor or leader must understand how to: select activities that target specific skill development, safely manage the play environment, and direct play to build enjoyable, intensive learning experiences.

A Games Philosophy

Teaching technical skills through play is an exciting, fast-paced experience to which children and adults respond with enthusiasm. Kids stand poised for action - lots of action - and their desires can be met by an instructor tuned into the effectiveness of play in a variety of activities -- crosscountry skiing, canoeing, kayaking, orienteering and more.

Playing games with core physical skills provides an enjoyable way for people to learn basic skills quickly and to combine them efficiently

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into athletic movements. Short, light-hearted exercises and activities meet a child's need for action, involvement, speed, challenge and fun.

Games can also benefit adults because the activities encourage participants to loosen up physically and mentally. Adults can channel the intensity they often bring to a workshop into tension-free learning.

Often without realizing the hidden goal of excellent skiing or paddling, participants respond to intriguing tasks in a game, immerse themselves in good practice and expand their means of safely participating in the sport. Ultimately, they become more proficient in the activity.

An emphasis on cooperative play also gives young learners an attractive alternative to I-dare-you follow-the-leader schemes and provides them with new tricks for outdoor entertainment. Kids and adults can both appreciate the element of cooperation that allows them to have low-key fun with other participants.

Safety can be promoted wisely and well by leaders who understand how to encourage good playing. Beneath the laughter and seeming chaos is an organized approach that requires much structure and more work on the leader's part. Establishing a clear organization and ground rules for safe play is a necessity.

Basic Organization

The Objective. Every game has a hidden agenda for the participants, and it is matched to the abilities of individuals in a group. The leaders target a specific skill or move that they wish to

develop and choose an activity that encourages its practice. For instance, tag games on snow promote lots of turning and speed control.

Duration. Avoid running a good game into the ground. Stop it when participants want more! With younger kids, you need lots of short tasks to keep their attention, which means a big bag of tricks.

Intensity. Intense activities may be exhausting or become chaotic, so instructors should be prepared to call time-outs to rest or to reorganize. For instance, slalom courses on flatwater require a series of short sprints between "gates" (bobbers) which can be very fatiguing. Recognize when it's time to take a break or change to a low-intensity task.

Total Participation. Everyone plays, and no one stands on the sidelines. Games that eliminate players often stop the practice of those who need it most. Make sure the last skier or paddler over the line gets to make the next call.

Role of the Leader. The leader should play with the players as much as possible and be careful of being an observer who can subtly affect players' psychological comfort. However, a referee *is* needed in some activities to direct boisterous action.

Fair Teams. Creative ways to choose partnerships or teams eliminates the socially disastrous effects of being the last person chosen. Choose teams by clothing color, birth month, favorite food, favorite animal, type of skis, color of boat....

Cooperation vs. Competition. Activities should emphasize enjoyment through participation rather than keeping score. However, competition against oneself can be valuable, and "personal best" activities encourage a person to improve his or her individual record.

For instance, establish a two-point course where each skier counts his or her total number of strides between the points. The next time the skier tries to reduce the number of strides with help from the leader: flex the leg more to push off or glide longer on each ski. It's a great way to focus on specific skills.

Terrain. The terrain should work in the participant's favor and help them meet the game's objective. Skiers find wide open spaces better than narrow trails. Flat or gentle terrain is often safer than steep inclines. Paddlers need gentle rapids first.

Collisions. Some activities lead to collisions or pigpiles and should be avoided for safety's sake. Choose games where the participants need open spaces to play well. Skiers should avoid hand tagging where their skis can cross; ask them to throw a hat or mitten to tag another player. Paddlers should lob balls or sponges at other people. "Soft" props that give way upon impact also enhance safety.

Rules. A few simple rules are easiest to remember and observe. Complex activities can get truly confusing. Basis safety rules might be:

- Be able to ski around someone who has fallen.
- Do not intentionally ram another craft.
- Let go of your partner if you are going to fall.
- All action stops until a capsized boat is rescued.

Traffic patterns can establish "rules of the road" with "up" and "down" travel lanes on a hill or in a rapid, passing zones and safe stopping places (not in the middle of trail intersections or in tiny eddies!)

Sample Games

Many great games ideas come from a leader's experience in other leisure programs. The following activities have been adapted from activities used in community recreation programs and ropes course programming. Be creative, adapt childhood games and activities, and keep watching other arenas for interesting ideas.

I watched the University of Massachusetts' women's basketball team lead a community clinic for young girls, and their warm-up movement drills provided me with the inspiration for a new round of ski activities. The muse can strike at any time!

The following examples show how a few simple games can be modified for the ski or water playground:

Snowplow Trains. Flat land, packed snow conditions. One skier is the plow, and another skier is the engine (with or without skis). The engine pushes the plow across the snow. The plow can brake and make the engine work harder. Skiers can have train races or pretend to plow city streets. Great for skiers with limited speed control to learn how to turn without fearing the hill!

Pie Tag (or Pizza Tag). Flat land. Skiers stay within an playing area with boundaries (wearing one or both skis). One skier is "it" and tries to tag other skiers. Skiers are safe if they drop into wedge and call out their favorite pie (or pizza). This activity also encourages quick turning and active skating.

Slowest Snowplow Races. Moderate to steep hills. On "go," each skier uses a wedge to descend the hill as slowly as possible without stopping. The trick is to keep moving. Slowest person wins! The goal is

speed control in a braking wedge. This activity can be adapted to water, where kayakers paddle across flatwater as slowly and *smoothly* as possible by linking perfect strokes.

Crossover Dodgeball. Flat terrain or flatwater. This variation on dodge ball keeps everyone playing the game. The playing field has an imaginary line down the center. Skiers or paddlers divide into two groups and choose a side for their team. They try to hit the opposite team with the ball, and the dodging creates lots of action on the field. People who are hit cross over the line and join the other team. Playing with one ski increases control, and asking paddlers to stay within 20 feet of the line keeps the action contained where the ball can reach them.

Sharks and Minnows. Flat land or flatwater. Establish a rectangular playing field with safety zones at each end. The entire group (of minnows) waits in one end zone and prepares to ski or paddle to the other safety zone. A "shark" waits in the middle and yells "shark attack" to signal that the "minnows" must leave their safety zone. The shark tags as many minnows as possible with each passing, and each minnow becomes a shark as soon as they are tagged. Lots of fast action in this one!